

North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System

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VIETNAM VETERANS TRIBUTE 2019: A Second Homecoming Saves A Life

The 2nd in a series of weekly articles highlighting and celebrating Vietnam Veterans in advance of Vietnam Veterans Day 2019 and the North Florida Vietnam Veterans Tribute and Ride 2019.



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GAINESVILLE, FL - If it weren't for the New England accent, you'd probably think Fred Judkins II was born in North Florida. It feels like he's been here for years.

If there is a meeting related to helping Veterans he's there – like the monthly Flag breakfast meeting at Brown's restaurant in Alachua, FL.

If there is an issue involving honoring military members and Veterans he's making his voice heard – like a recent protest of the local school board's decision to use Veterans Day as a 'make up' school day.

If there is a focus group on initiatives to enhance the delivery of care to Veterans by the Malcom Randall VAMC, Judkins is not only on it, but recruiting additional members and contacting the director and key staff via email and social media whenever he has an idea that will help.

If there is a discussion on surviving a suicide attempt he's there as well – letting fellow Veterans and caregivers know how destructive depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can be and how he nearly lost his own life by his own hands.



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He's at the Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) meetings – he's the secretary; he's at the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) meeting – he's the adjutant; he's at the American Legion meeting – he's the judge advocate and third vice commander.

When he's not serving in a leadership capacity with those organizations he relaxes and attends Marine Corps League and Korean War Veterans of America meetings – he's only an associate member of both so he gets to enjoy the downtime.

Judkins is so involved with the area's Veterans community that he holds the unique distinction of receiving the Alachua County Veterans Banquet's annual recognition as 'Veteran of the Year' for 2016 as well as being acknowledged as 'Veteran Supporter of the Year' for 2018 at the most recent ceremony held, February 2nd. He's the first individual in the 15 years of the event who has received both awards.

But as much as he has become a vital part of the North Florida Veterans community, Alachua County has been his home for only four years; and the journey he took to get here both challenged and changed him into the powerful advocate he is now for his fellow service members.

Judkins, 73, went to grade school in a one room school house in Upton, ME. The son and nephew of World War II Veterans, his grandparents owned the town's grocery store and they served as the switchboard operators for locals who used crank phones.

"About 14 people were subscribers; they would get calls into the store and my cousin would operate the switchboard," Judkins said. "My sister still lives in Bryant Pond, home of the very last 'Crank' phone in the United States. It was fun calling home when I was in flight school. I'd get an operator on the line and give her instructions on how to get the call through. She wouldn't believe me. This was before cell phones, you know."

Flight school for Judkins was Fort Wolters, TX and later Fort Rucker, AL. ROTC had been mandatory at the University of Maine where he was an undergraduate. He stayed in ROTC for four years and graduated so he could learn to fly helicopters. He knew he'd be going to Vietnam.

"Flight school was pretty interesting. I was a Commissioned Officer so I lived off base. Fort Rucker was a 'dry county', so we could have alcohol on base but not off. If you left any bottles in the trash people reported you and the local authorities would come get you," Judkins mused. "We learned to drive home slowly so we wouldn't get stopped by the police."

After finishing flight school and spending some time as an instructor state side he arrived in Vietnam in spring of 1970.

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"When I first got there, I went to the 90th Replacement Battalion to check in and went from there to Pleiku and met up with the 7/17th [Air Cavalry Squadron]," Judkins said. "I remember it was hot and dusty in the bus. I remember seeing just lots of Vietnamese."

His primary job was to fly the Bell UH1 "Huey" helicopter, but he also flew front seat on "Cobra Gunships" and "Loaches" – bubble shaped light observation helicopters.

"It was relatively quiet when I first got there. "Lam son 719" changed things," Judkins said. "We were flying into Laos every day"

"Lam son 719" was a mission to disrupt the logistical system of the of the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong through its network of paths and tunnels in Kingdom of Laos. American ground forces were prohibited from conducting operations in the country, but air support had been in place for some time. The South Vietnamese Army carried out the offensive in early 1971. Judkins was one of the pilots providing air support.

"One day I was scheduled to fly Cobra front seat but got pulled 2-hours before the mission because they needed a Commissioned Officer on the front line with the South Vietnamese for communications support," Judkins recalled, "I heard over the radio that the pilots sent in my place were shot down in Laos. They were recovered, but that was just the nature of the war."

The offensive would last for three months, with Judkins flying seven days a week. He would return to the states in April of 1971 when his tour ended, but very little prepared him for his first homecoming.

"When I came home I was still in the Army – I had a four-year commitment," Judkins said. "My wife picked me up at the airport in Bangor, ME and told me she wanted a divorce.

"We had two small kids at the time, Nicole and Karen. I wanted to go back to Vietnam. A friend of mine from school called my wife and talked her into staying with me."

They would eventually divorce after 40 years.

Fred initially found success working for Veterans at his alma mater, the University of Maine at Orono, but not without hostility from the administration and those who did not support the war.

"Nobody liked us. I went back to get my Master's Degree in counseling but the university didn't like us. There were about 100 of us [Vietnam Veterans] there and we got the dean to give us our own space in a building basement and we created our own student Veterans center. People didn't really speak or interact with us much. The most vocal group was Vietnam Veterans against the War," Judkins said.

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According to Judkins, even these many years later Vietnam still controls his life.

"My PTSD manifested itself in deep clinical depression. I started drinking a lot. I was a high functioning alcoholic. I didn't drink at work. I'd go home and go upstairs and drink myself to sleep. Then I'd get up in the morning, run 10 miles, then go to work."

For 27 years' "work" was for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) where he would eventually lead the Vocational Rehab program in Togus, ME.

Judkins said he went into a major depression from 2005 through 2006.

"I knew I wasn't right, but I didn't understand depth of what depression was doing to me," Judkins said.

According to Judkins his depression led him to make some unfortunate decisions while working for VA. Those decisions would cost him 10-months in a minimum-security corrections facility in South Carolina.

After his prison stay he remained in South Carolina and eventually spiraled out of control. He began seeing a VA Psychiatrist, but his medication made him manic and he eventually became suicidal.

"I was sleeping for maybe one hour a day. I'd go out in the lake in the middle of the night with my kayak and play with alligators," Judkins said. "Some were bigger than my kayak. My psychiatrist thought that was part of my suicide plan."

"I didn't own a weapon. I dropped a lot of weight. I wasn't paying bills, phone shut off, I was just basically existing. The Vet Center where I'd volunteer would send the police to do welfare checks. I would always tell them I was ok...but I was just waiting to die."

One day he heard banging on his door. His daughter Nicole and son Nathan had come to intervene. Nicole moved him home with her to Gainesville, FL the next morning.

In Gainesville Judkins received inpatient electro convulsive therapy (ECT) for his clinical depression at Shands Hospital at the University of Florida and at the Malcom Randall VAMC. According to him it changed his life.

"It killed my depression and I received new medications that helped me with the nightmares and depression as well," Judkins said. "It took a little while, but I threw myself into the Veterans community. After the ECT, I started doing a little bit more every day. It's been amazing. It all started when I went to the Alachua Veterans Board meeting and VVA meeting. I joined as a charter member in 2016. After that I was working with a great counselor at the Vet Center here and started connecting."

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With the upcoming Vietnam Veterans Tribute in Gainesville, Judkins is excited about connecting with even



more of his fellow Vietnam and Vietnam Era Veterans – especially those who’ve never felt welcomed home.

‘I’m really excited about it and hoping it reaches a lot of veterans who just haven’t felt welcomed. There’s still an amazing number out there who feel that the country never recognized them.’

Judkins doesn’t have a motorcycle for the ride portion of the event, but he’s going to take ‘point’ in front of the bikes with his 1990 Jeep Wrangler which has been painted to look just

like one of the jeeps he rode in during the war.

“Everybody loves it. I was driving other day and saw a Vietnam Veteran sticker on a car and beeped and they smiled and waved. I think it made both of us feel good. I do have a Vespa 150 (scooter) too. It’s licensed as a motorcycle. I was going down 39th Ave and I passed four Harley’s,” Judkins said with a wink.

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The North Florida Vietnam Veterans Tribute 2019 is a joint initiative of the US Department of Veterans Affairs North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System, Alachua County, FL Veterans Services and multiple community and Veterans Service Organizations and volunteers to honor the Vietnam Veterans Community of North Central Florida, South Georgia and beyond. The tribute will feature a law enforcement escorted motorcycle ride through Gainesville, FL and a special event at the Alachua County Veterans Memorial Park which will include live entertainment and a replica of the Vietnam Wall. All are invited to attend and honor and welcome home America’s Vietnam Veterans. For more information on attending the event or volunteering, please visit

www.vietnamveterantribute.org